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RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION AND THE IMPACT ON ELIGIBILITY FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN TEXAS

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Abstract

Response to Intervention (RTI) trends and special education referrals were examined and compared with the self-reported data of special education directors and evaluation staff to determine the overall impact of RTI on special education referrals. A descriptive non-experimental design study using existing data and survey methods was used. Findings from archival data demonstrated that during the period ranging from 2007 to 2011, trends at the state level, across regional services centers, and in one independent school district showed an increase in the number of students who were referred and found eligible for special education services. However, there was an average decrease in the number of students receiving special education services at the regional and state levels and an increase according to one district level. The trends that evolved suggest a possible relationship between the RTI process and increasingly accurate referrals for special education services. Findings from the survey administered at the Education Service Center (ESC) indicated the perceptions of special education directors and evaluation staff did not mirror the findings of the archival data. However, data gathered from the survey administered at the Independent School District (ISD) indicated the perceptions of the special education director and evaluation staff did mirror the findings of actual archival data.

Special education services within public school systems have undergone significant changes since the passing of Public Law (PL) 94-142 (United States Department of Education, 2010). In 1975, PL 94-142 ensured a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities. This law had an extraordinary impact on the education system across the country. It generated massive changes, including access to services for students who had previously been denied an education in public schools and changes in the area of special education referrals. Much debate has taken place over the years regarding how students are identified for special education services.

With the intention of narrowing the achievement gap, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (United States Department of Education 2008). This act became a law in January of 2002. Through emphasis on accountability and the premise that every child deserved a high quality, research-based education, NCLB focused on the following; no child would be left behind regardless of disability, socioeconomic status, language differences, or other relevant factors. In order to align special education services with NCLB, the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 (United States Department of Education, 2002) was reauthorized and signed into law on December 3, 2004. IDEA 2004 (Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004, 2006) was designed to address various options, including the discrepancy model for special education identification.

The intelligence quotient (IQ) – achievement discrepancy model examines a discrepancy between a student's scores on achievement testing and IQ testing (Education N.A., 2014). If a significant discrepancy exists, in addition to other criteria, then a student is deemed to have a learning disability. While not entirely inaccurate, the discrepancy model may purport a “wait and see” system of identification, which, unfortunately, allows students to struggle through kindergarten, first, and second grades until they fall further and further behind their peers. Because it is difficult for some students to meet the discrepancy criteria until the third or fourth grade, academic intervention assistance can be delayed, rather than initiated early when there might have been a greater chance of success (Reschly, 2002). The use of the discrepancy model as a major source of identifying a student in need of specially designed instruction changed with the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) or IDEA 2004. However, the reauthorization provides support for a new approach stating:

In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation. (Building the legacy: IDEA 2004, 2006, Statute: Title I(B))

This process came to be known as Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI includes the use of scientific, research-based interventions as the foundation for identifying students with a specific learning disability. RTI can be described as a system of educational decision making that strives to improve learning success for all students and to produce reliable data that guides decision making for special education eligibility (VanDerHeyden, 2011).

The RTI process is divided into levels of support called tiers. The instructional intent of an RTI tier system is to promote student success in the least restrictive environment. The state of Texas describes an RTI model as one that meets the needs of all students through a continuum of services, usually provided in the general education setting. This array of services offers:

- high-quality instruction and scientific, researched-based, tiered intervention strategies aligned with individual student need
- frequent monitoring of student progress to guide results-based academic and behavioral decisions
- data-based school improvement
- the application of student response data to influence critical educational decisions that involve placement, intervention, curriculum, and instructional goals and methodologies (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

RTI emphasizes using both learning rate over time and level of performance to make important educational decisions. RTI is not a program; nor is it a vehicle of direct access to

special education services. RTI is a process that integrates the early use of necessary interventions with methods of identifying students who have a learning disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). It must be emphasized that the objective of RTI not be to minimize referrals for special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). The purpose of any implementation of the RTI process is to provide students with the appropriate education that fosters academic and behavioral success founded upon research-based instructional practices and implemented in the least restrictive environment.

The onset of the RTI process focused on increased accountability and required educators to provide high-quality instruction to all students. In contrast to the previous practice of referring students who were struggling for special education services without documentation of academic interventions, students now received documented academic attention before a referral. Interventions through RTI are typically delivered in the general education classroom by general education teachers.

To be evaluated for a learning disability (LD), the state of Texas requires an evaluation process that includes a multidisciplinary team approach (Texas Education Agency, 2013a). The team must consider information from a variety of sources including curriculum, the student's grades by subject area, and repeated assessments over time. The multidisciplinary team uses the RTI process to evaluate data that demonstrates an individual student has received appropriate instruction. This can be done by comparing the student's progress to those of his/her peers and the mastery of specific instructional objectives (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

While RTI is one facet of the evaluation, the discrepancy component has not been entirely eliminated from the evaluation process. Texas schools are still permitted to use the discrepancy model as a portion of an LD evaluation. However, the evidence of a discrepancy

cannot be the sole determinant of a specific learning disability (Texas Education Agency, 2013a).

In addition to state and local assessments, many schools are using formative assessment and progress monitoring to guide instruction. This increase in instructional accountability, change in evaluation procedures, and implementation of RTI have significantly changed how students are identified for special education services. There appears to be no current clear-cut system for structuring and implementing RTI (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Deschler, 2007; Werts, 2006). Furthermore, the actual role and impact of RTI in the evaluation process are somewhat unclear. However, if an RTI system is efficiently implemented, it appears that fewer students should qualify for special education services than before RTI implementation.

Since the introduction of RTI, research dedicated to the various aspects of the actual process has emerged (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Hoover & Love, 2011; Ogonosky, 2008). However, there is a limited amount of research related to the impact RTI has on special education referrals. The impact on special education referrals brought about by RTI was the underpinning for this study. The purpose of the study was to examine the trends in special education referrals brought about by RTI and to explore how those trends compare with the self-reported data of special education directors and evaluation staff.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study include:

1. Based on student referrals for special education, what are the trends at the state level, across regional services centers, and in one independent school district?
2. What are the trends in the number of students receiving special education services in Texas from 2007 to 2011?

3. How does the self-reported RTI data collected on a survey of special education directors and special education evaluation staff compare to the data collected from the state sources?

Information gathered from this study could assist future researchers and educators in analyzing data to determine trends in the referral process and possibly help improve the implementation of the RTI process based on identified trends. With the increase in accountability and demands being placed on students and educators, it is imperative that the study of the RTI process and its impact on the educational system continue. Study of referral trends and the number of students qualifying for special education services can assist schools in a variety of ways. Schools that analyze referral trends and qualification for services can improve instruction for all students. They can enhance intervention assistance provided to students and increase appropriate referrals for special education services.

Research Method

To answer the research questions related to trends in special education referrals brought about by Response to Intervention (RTI) and to explore how those trends compared with the self-reported data of special education directors and evaluation staff, the researcher conducted a descriptive non-experimental design study using both archival and survey data. This design was selected based on the availability of informative archival data in Texas and the ability to compare the archival data with empirical data gathered from a survey.

Before the administration of the survey, permission was sought and obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Texas Woman's University (TWU) to conduct the research survey. The researcher seeking permission was an administrator at a local ISD that was part of a regional ESC. Due to a large number of Independent School Districts and charter schools in

Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is divided into 20 regions, each region containing an Educational Service Center, or ESC. In addition to permission from the IRB, permission was obtained from one ESC and a local ISD to distribute and collect the paper and pencil survey. Both the ESC and local ISD granted permission and were presented with the survey results once the study was completed.

Instrumentation

When conducting survey research, the initial step is to utilize the most appropriate survey tool. If an appropriate survey is not available, the researcher must design one. During the literature review for the project, a suitable survey for gathering the self-reported RTI data of special education directors and special education evaluation staff was not identified. Therefore, the researcher devised and validated a survey that consisted of one prescreening question and twelve statements.

The survey development process consisted of four steps. The first step was the review of current literature to identify whether there is an existing survey to meet the needs of the research. The second step was the creation of test questions appropriate for the research. Step three involved the implementation of a pilot study to determine the validity of the survey instrument. The insurance of the survey instrument's validity and reliability comprised step four.

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted in a masters' level special education research course offered at a university in north, central Texas. The pilot study was administered to graduate students enrolled in a research course. Twelve students, representing the disciplines of special education and educational administration, were present for the class. The students were provided with directions and information related to the survey. Student participation was voluntary, and no

incentives were offered for participating in either the survey or focus group. Upon completion of the survey, the students moved to a separate section of the class to assist the researcher with a focus group.

The focus group was informed that the session would be recorded using an iPad and an iPhone. The research project utilized an iPad that had an MP3 Recorder application and an iPhone with the Audio Memos application. The recording was used to provide the researcher with an accurate representation of the feedback collected during the focus group. None of the recordings were used as part of the data for the actual survey.

Two versions of the twelve-question survey, form A and form B, were developed and prepared for administration. Form A contained demographic data and was developed for administration at a regional ESC. Form B was designed for administration at one local ISD and did not contain demographic data to protect the anonymity of the ISD staff.

Administration of the Survey

Form - A was administered at an ESC to a group of special education directors and special education evaluation staff. The survey was administered on February 20, 2014, at the Special Education Director's meeting and at the Special Education Evaluation Advisory meeting held on February 21, 2014. The researcher presented the survey, provided all directions, and gathered completed surveys within the time frame of the regularly scheduled meeting. Respondents were asked to answer one pre-screening question and twelve survey questions related to their perception of RTI within their school district. The survey used a Likert Scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with points ranging from 1-4 being assigned by the researcher. Seventy-three people were registered for the Special Education Directors meeting, and forty-three people were present. Of the forty-three attendees, all forty-three completed the

survey. Of the one hundred registered for the Special Education Evaluation Advisory meeting, seventy people attended. Of those individuals, sixty-five completed the survey. This provided a return rate of 96% for the surveys administered at the ESC.

Form - B, the survey that did not contain demographic data, was presented by the researcher to the special education director and special education evaluation staff of an ISD located within the ESC. Respondents were asked to answer one pre-screening question and twelve survey questions related to their perception of RTI within their school district. The survey used a Likert Scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” with points ranging from 1-4 being assigned by the researcher. All data was returned to the researcher in an unmarked envelope to maintain the confidentiality of the staff. Seven surveys were administered and returned, resulting in a response rate of 100%.

Data Collection

This study intended to examine the impact of Response to Intervention on the referral rates of students eligible for special education services and to compare the perceptions of identified educators to the reported data gathered from state sources. The data was gathered from three existing sources and a survey designed by the researcher. The review of the data at the state level from 2007 to 2011 focused on the actual number of students who received special education services within the state of Texas. Data was then examined to determine the percentage of students who were referred for services within each regional services center and the subsequent number of students found eligible for special education services. The same data was further identified at an individual school district level. The final source of information was based upon the results obtained from the survey instrument administered at a regional ESC and local ISD level.

Data sources

Data utilized was gathered from four sources: Special Education Adhoc Reporting System (SPEARS), open records request, Texas Education Agency Login (TEAL), and survey data.

Special Education Adhoc Reporting System. The initial data was mined from SPEARS. SPEARS provides dynamic ad-hoc reporting on students with disabilities in the State of Texas. The data collected from the SPEARS system addresses both state and regions of the state. All twenty educational service centers were examined for trends.

Open records request. A second source of data was obtained through an open records request submitted to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The request sought data on Indicator 11 of the State Performance Plan (SPP) (Texas Education Agency, 2013b). Indicator 11 of the SPP measures the percentage of students that were, with signed, written parental evaluation consent, evaluated within the state established timeline. The Special Education Department of the TEA (Texas Education Agency, 2013a) provides public reporting of the SPP on a statewide level, but individual regional data is not publicly reported. The open records request obtained data specific to each of the twenty regions in Texas over a period from 2007 to 2011. Once all data was obtained, the researcher compiled the information from each regional service center and ascertained the percentage of students found eligible for special education services. This percentage was based on the number of referrals per regional service center, and the number of Admission Review and Dismissal (ARD) (Region 18 Education Service Center & Texas Education Agency) committee meetings held within ninety days for eligible students.

Texas Education Agency Login. The third source of archival data was obtained through the researcher's access to the Texas Education Agency Login (TEAL) system. The information

focused on referral rates and eligibility from 2007 to 2011. Beginning with 2007 each report referenced a specific year. Once all reports were obtained, the researcher compiled the data and ascertained the percentage of students who qualified for special education services. This percentage was based on the number of referrals and the number of ARD committee meetings conducted within ninety days for eligible students.

Survey. The final source of data was a twelve-question survey designed and validated by the researcher. The survey was administered to a group of special education directors and evaluation staff from one regional ESC and a local ISD. The survey was administered to 108 individuals. Of the 108, only one individual answered “no” to the pre-screening question, thereby eliminating that person from completing the question portion of the survey. The prescreening question was, “At least one school in my district is using the RTI process.” The survey population was comprised of 95% females and 5% males. Of the population, 52% were special education evaluation staff, 28% special education directors and 19% reported as other. Ninety-two percent of the population reported being certified in special education, 8% were not certified. Ninety-one percent of the individuals surveyed had obtained a master’s degree, and 9% had a Ph.D. Thirty percent had been in the current position for four-to-seven years; however, 55% had been in the education profession for twenty plus years.

Results

Based on the data reported, the State of Texas had a mean increase of 3% in the number of students who were referred and found eligible for special education services (see table 1).

Table 1**Percentage of Students Found Eligible for Special Education Services across Regional Service Centers and State Totals**

Region	% of Students found eligible for services	% of Students found eligible for services	% of Students found eligible for services	% of Students found eligible for services	% of Students found eligible for services	<i>Mean Increase</i>
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	
01	62.1	66.4	69.8	67.8	79.1	6.5
02	73.3	81.0	82.8	80.2	81.4	2.8
03	73.3	70.0	80.9	75.8	80.1	4.8
04	69.4	74.6	76.9	78.5	75.4	2.3
05	76.2	74.6	81.8	83.7	77.4	.6
06	64.0	74.9	82.6	72.5	79.2	6.1
07	74.3	79.1	79.8	79.0	81.9	1.8
08	74.7	75.6	79.9	83.4	82.3	2.5
09	73.1	78.6	79.9	60.4	78.0	3.4
10	65.7	72.1	71.9	74.8	72.8	2.6
11	72.9	75.9	74.5	74.9	77.5	1.6
12	58.8	69.5	68.9	74.4	71.9	5.5
13	72.8	79.1	79.7	80.5	80.9	2.8
14	79.0	83.4	81.3	78.5	77.7	-.6
15	63.3	67.6	72.7	72.3	66.2	1.3
16	67.6	70.0	72.3	75.0	72.5	1.8
17	76.1	78.8	79.5	85.9	81.0	1.8
18	72.8	71.4	77.2	78.4	82.4	4.2
19	64.4	68.2	75.9	76.8	75.1	4.1
20	71.3	78.6	80.7	82.2	81.0	3.3
Statewide Total	70.3	74.5	77.4	76.7	77.7	3.

Throughout the twenty regions in Texas, there was an overall mean increase in the number of students who were referred and found eligible for special education services with the exception of one region. This region had a -.6% increase. Within this region, there was a mean increase of 1.6% in the number of students who were referred and found eligible for special education services. Finally, there was a mean increase of 5% in the number of students who were referred and found eligible for special education services within the local school district.

Across the twenty regions in Texas, there was an average decrease of 3.9% in the number of students being served by special education from the 2007 school year to the 2011 school year (see table 2). A comprehensive review of the state data ascertained a 9% decrease in the number of students being served by special education (see table 3). However, the data at the ISD level depicted a 7% increase in the number of students being served by special education (see table 4).

Table 2**Students Receiving Special Education Services across Regions**

Region	07	08	09	10	11	Mean Decrease
1	35,114	33,652	32,206	31,685	31,482	2.7%
2	13,012	12,073	11,302	10,705	10,396	5.4%
3	6,664	6,270	5,954	5,503	5,290	5.7%
4	98,279	93,682	88,970	87,365	86,896	3.0%
5	10,236	9,517	8,853	8,528	8,019	5.9%
6	17,546	16,905	16,140	15,546	15,193	3.5%
7	19,754	18,599	17,522	16,746	15,980	5.2%
8	8,075	7,465	6,996	6,623	6,359	5.1%
9	5,238	5,122	4,929	4,731	4,578	3.3%
10	73,537	71,659	69,494	69,585	70,038	1.21%
11	51,409	49,555	48,406	47,430	47,506	1.9%
12	20,351	18,522	17,142	16,317	16,105	5.7%
13	36,901	35,194	34,256	34,987	35,810	.7%
14	6,885	6,421	5,972	5,935	5,980	3.4%
15	6,497	5,707	5,248	5,011	5,002	6.4%
16	9,557	8,900	8,126	7,779	7,738	5.1%

17	10,562	10,092	9,678	8,868	8,745	4.6%
18	8,078	7,492	7,002	6,578	6,360	5.8%
19	16,741	16,386	15,765	15,435	15,736	1.5%
20	44,224	43,132	41,919	41,235	40,917	1.9%
Average						3.9%

Table 3**Students Receiving Special Education Services in Texas**

Texas	07	08	09	10	11	Decrease
Total	498,660	476,345	455,880	446,592	444,130	9%

Table 4**Students Receiving Special Education Services across ISD**

Texas	07	08	09	10	11	Increase
Total	243	255	247	259	304	7%

When examining the survey data, the researcher initially compared the data amassed from the regional ESC to the data amassed from one local ISD. The scores reported by the local ISD (see figure 1) were to some extent higher than those reported by the regional ESC (see figure 2).

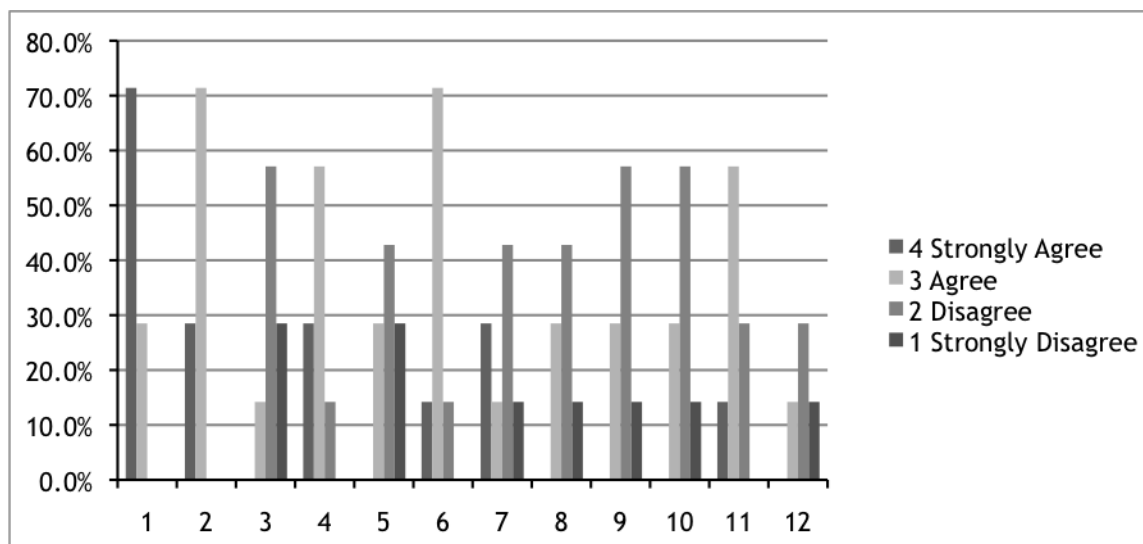


Figure 1. Percentage of Responses Form-B (ISD)

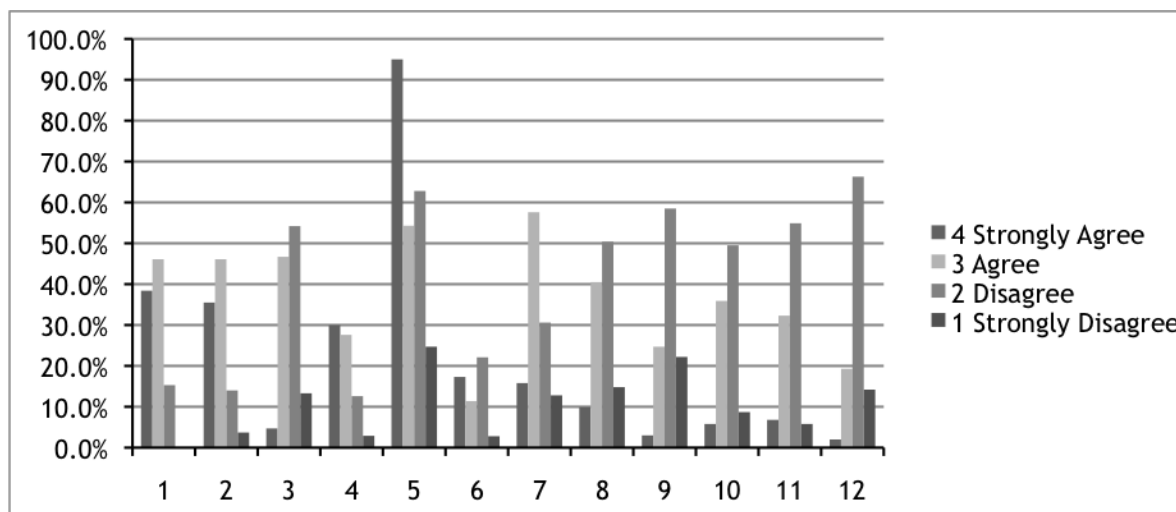


Figure 2. Percentage of Responses Form-A (ESC)

There was a deviation noticed on the question addressing RTI implementation and no changes in the number of referrals for special education services. More than half of respondents on both

surveys disagreed with the statement; however, more respondents from the regional ESC strongly disagreed with the statement while the respondents from local ISD agreed with the statement. Nevertheless, when charted the graphics revealed the responses tended to track each other. (see figure3).

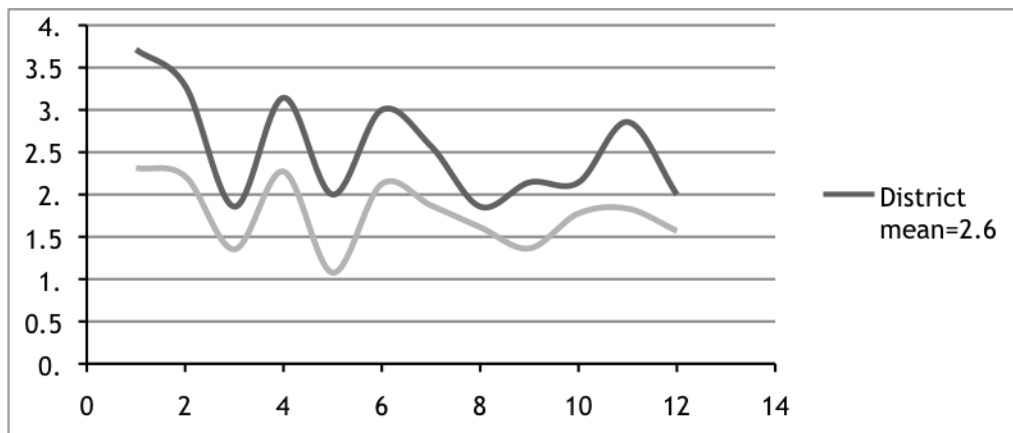


Figure 3. Survey Comparisons

This demonstrated that the perceptions reported at the educational service center (ESC) were comparable to the ones reported at the district level.

The final process entailed the researcher examining the responses on the ESC survey and ISD survey to compare the facts gathered from the archival data. For this specific study, the researcher concentrated on the actual referrals and eligibility and outcomes compared to perceived referrals and eligibility results.

When comparing the archival data to the survey data, the researcher determined the following results:

- The archival data depicted a mean increase of 1.6% in the number of students referred and found eligible within one regional ESC. In response to whether the survey participants had seen an **increase** in the number of students who were **referred and found eligible** for special education services, 54.9% of the ESC respondents disagreed.

- The archival data reflected a mean increase of 5% in the number of students referred and found eligible within an ISD. In response to whether the survey participants had seen an **increase** in the number of students who were **referred and found eligible** for special education services, 57.1 % of the ISD respondents agreed.

Conclusions

This study contained analysis and descriptive archival data obtained from various sources within the Texas Education Agency and identified the perception of special education directors and evaluation staff related to RTI in their school district. The collected information resulted in the following conclusions. The RTI process has had a significant impact on the manner in which students are served and identified for special education services. As of March, 2012, the following fourteen states have mandated the use of RTI as part of the identification process for a specific learning disability (SLD): Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Rhode Island, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Delaware, New Mexico, and New York (Zirkel, 2013). The State of Texas developed a guidance document in 2008 to help school districts implement RTI systems. Several universities now offer certifications and classes related explicitly to RTI; The University of Texas at Austin has partnered with the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk (MCPER) to build capacity for Texas schools to implement RTI and assist students (University of Texas, 2014), The University of Southern Main offers a Certificate of Graduate Studies in Response To Intervention (University of Southern Main, 2014), Lehigh University offers an Ed.S. Program in Response To Intervention (Lehigh University, 2014), and The University of Nebraska – Lincoln offers a graduate certificate in the area of Response To Intervention: Reading (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2014). Each of

these programs is designed to assist with the implementation of the RTI process, which should ultimately lead to more appropriate referrals for special education services.

The function of an RTI process is to provide all students with the best possible education that supports academic success and can be implemented in the least restrictive environment. General education teachers are expected to assist students who are struggling before referring them to special education services. Therefore, the supposition is that with the implementation of an RTI process, the referral rates for special education should decline as the RTI process improves. Also, the system should produce referrals that are more accurate and generate increased percentages of the students who are appropriate referrals for special education services and who qualify for those services.

The RTI process compels educators to provide high-quality instruction to all students and documentation of intervention to students who struggled academically, before the student being referred for special education services. If this process is implemented correctly, there should be a decrease in the number of students referred for special education services. However, with the students who are referred, there should be an increase in the number that qualifies for special education services. The trends that evolved during the research process suggest a relationship between the RTI process and increasingly accurate referrals for special education services. With the continued appropriate implementation of the RTI process in Texas, students should receive the most appropriate instruction in the least restrictive environment.

Future Research

The findings of this study provide a basic frame of reference from which to make recommendations for future research. Additional research is suggested to determine if the trends in the referral process over time can be expanded beyond the five-year period of data collection

presented this study. If more information is obtained about existing, emerging, and changing trends, new studies, and strategies can be formulated. The understanding of present and future trends can assist future researchers and practitioners when evaluating and improving the identification process for special education services. Also, the details provided by the survey should be further researched to provide a more in-depth understanding of the RTI process across the regional ESC's. There is a need to continue to assess trends and general information integral to special education services, referrals, and eligibility factors.

All of these possibilities reinforce the need for additional studies in the area of RTI and the impact it has on special education referral rates. Schools that analyze referral trends and qualifications for services can use that information to improve decision-making. Educators can continue to enhance timely intervention assistance provided to students and increase appropriate referrals for special education services.

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